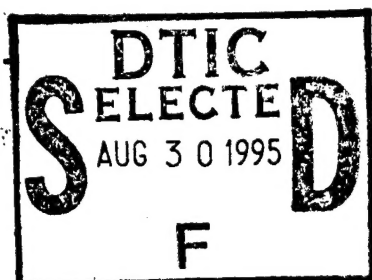


PROFESSIONAL MILITARY COMPTROLLER SCHOOL

## IDEA PAPER

TITLE

### ALTERNATIVE LOW COST METHODS FOR THE FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT CAREER PROGRAM (FMCP) INTERVIEWS



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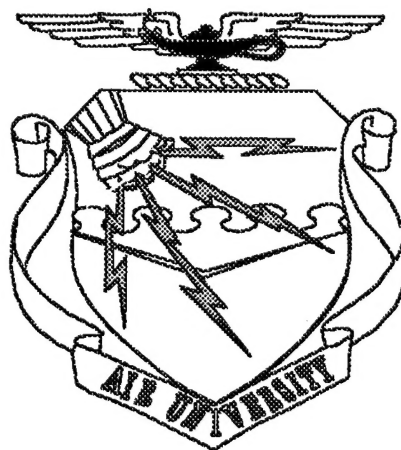
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## **PMCS IDEA PAPER**

**TITLE:** Alternative Low Cost Methods for the Financial Management Career Program (FMCP) Interviews

**PMCS CLASS:** 95-D

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**IDEA:** In this paper, I discuss alternative ways to accomplish the FMCP interview objective of an equitable measurement of talent, management qualities, and motivation. I realize the interview is but one factor in the "total person" rating, however, it is important nonetheless. The objectives should be preserved, but the interview process is too costly to remain unchanged.

#### **POINTS:**

- The costs of the interview cycle (as it is presently) outweigh the benefits.
- There are flaws in the current system that are most likely being overlooked.
- There is no right or wrong answer and the face-to-face interview is the single best method of communication; it's simply not the most optimal.
- Standardized testing, teleconferencing, video-teleconferencing, and videotaping are all feasible alternatives with positive and negative aspects.
- Videotaped interviews are probably the least costly method and most closely parallel the face-to-face interviews.
- A less expensive solution doesn't have to mirror the effectiveness of the current process, it just has to meet an arbitrary standard and be more efficient than the current method.
- My intent is to revive debate in FMCP circles concerning the interview cycles. I constantly hear financial management leaders speak of the prohibitive costs involved with the status quo. I've even heard some say the interviews will eventually have to be abandoned due the costs involved. I disagree. We just need a salient low cost alternative.

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**INTRODUCTION:** The Financial Management Career Program (FMCP)

interview is an excellent method of gathering information on a cadre of Air Force (AF) financial management professionals. The central question is not whether the process is worthwhile; the question becomes, is the benefit worth the cost? In addition, have inherent weaknesses in the system been overlooked by FMCP administrators? I will highlight some weaknesses in the current process, evaluate four alternatives (using cost-benefit as the guiding principle), and make recommendations for FMCP leadership discussion and possible action.

**DISCUSSION:** The information comprising the Total Person Score (TPS) is highly important to motivated people in the FMCP. Performance appraisal ratings, awards, education, and interview scores are all taken very seriously by those who strive to advance in the AF financial arena. The interview scores (37.5 percent of the TPS) have become the primary discriminator for determining the best in the business. Herein lies the first flaw in the current system. Managers of Department of Defense (DoD) civilians have been claiming for years, the appraisal process (representing 50 percent of the TPS) is broken. While I agree with this sentiment, absolutely zero changes to this process have been implemented -- at least during the past six-and-one-half years I've been employed by the Air Force. I've seen an outstanding contributor (in my opinion), rated average by a supervisor who was eventually replaced. Those in the office contributing little in comparison were given outstanding ratings as most all FMCP registrants are. The point

is, the appraisal process is extremely broken and little has been done to change it. The FMCP interview cycle is applied as a stop-gap measure at best.

There are definite benefits to the face-to-face interview. First of all, the FMCP management teams are intentionally trying to gain insight from a little artificial pressure added to all the interview candidates. In many management situations, stress is a factor. How a person handles the interview is a good indication of how stressful on-the-job situations will be managed. In addition, candidates are able to meet and talk with senior leadership (if they so wish) at the end of the day. Most always, members of the interview panel have time to speak one-on-one with interviewees or social functions are scheduled after the interviews are complete. This allows the interviewees an opportunity for informal networking and to gain some different insights on issues affecting financial management. All of this said, what's wrong with the status quo? To start, the process is not as level as most may think. For example, an out-of-cycle registrant from a base in Japan had to travel to Washington DC for an FMCP interview. It took a week for the FMCP administrators to reach him and set up the appointment due to telecommunications problems and the time difference. It logically follows, those interviewees from Washington DC were at a distinct advantage (on their home court) over someone who had traveled half-way around the world and suffered from jet-lag. In addition to time and distance factors, the actual timing of the interview cycles are a large factor. For example, I once interviewed during a Defense Acquisition Board (DAB) process for which I was the DAB coordinator. For those unfamiliar with DABs, suffice to say it's a very demanding workload consisting of 12 to 14 hour workdays on the average. The argument

can easily arise, "Well we can't work around everyone's specific needs." I agree; however, what about the timing of interviews coinciding with the due dates to HQ USAF for command financial plans? While people at the unit and base level have adequate time to prepare for the interviews, those at Headquarters are working long and grueling hours. This may be more of a factor of the drawdown than the interview process, but it's a factor nonetheless. The overriding point is, the process itself was designed to be standardized and fair to all involved. In other words, no one should have a distinct advantage over another. I question this premise.

Aside from all this, the cost of the program is singularly prohibitive. I was speaking with someone who had traveled transatlantic as an interview evaluator. This person told me, the process would eventually end simply due to the cost involved. While the individual could see the benefit of the interview, the cost seemed to far outweigh it.

**FOUR ALTERNATIVES:** I believe there are four low cost alternatives to the interview cycle that are reasonable and feasible: (1) standardized testing has been used to evaluate grade school children, to screen applicants for entrance into college and university programs, and for hiring decisions by firms with specific labor skill needs; (2) video teleconferencing is an exciting new way to reach out and almost touch someone; (3) conference calling, although there are pitfalls to being heard and not seen, is an excellent low cost communication medium; and (4) videotaped interviews allow the benefits of sight and sound without the communication link shortfalls. While there are advantages and disadvantages to each of the alternatives (plus leaving the current system intact), I believe the fourth option (videotaping) offers the most promise in the short run.

Standardized testing is used effectively in various capacities. People are tested before being admitted to colleges and universities. Tests are administered prior to professional certification in the legal, accounting, and medical fields. Air Force enlisted people through the grade of Master Sergeant take standardized tests to compete for promotions. I think it's fair to say the Air Force has a fine cadre of Non-Commissioned Officers and standardized testing is one important factor in ensuring the best qualified are promoted. Aside from these examples, testing will encourage a better understanding of all comptroller functional areas rather than only three of five required during the interview. More specifically, people will read and gain an understanding of cost, budget, acquisition, accounting and finance, and audit rather than concentrate on their specific disciplines. As far as administering the test, education centers are already established and control mechanisms are in place. FMCP administrators simply need to make the necessary contacts and start negotiating. Of course, the biggest drawback is the absence of face-to-face contact. Test performance can be measured, but you can't evaluate communication skills. Again, you must ask the question. Is it imperative to identify the best qualified employees to staff key financial management positions through the FMCP interview process, or are there adequate lower cost alternatives?

Video Teleconferencing (VTC), as I understand it, has been tested by FMCP for possible implementation and brushed aside as an unacceptable solution. The trial case (according to an explanation I received) was with an overseas base in the Pacific Theater and the communication link was less than reliable. While I'm convinced this VTC test case failed miserably, I'm not convinced the idea should be rejected at face value. As



worldwide connectivity problems gain solutions and communications infrastructure upgrades take place, VTC is an option worth revisiting. Distance Learning (DL) is beginning to become more available and reliable. The Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT) has successfully used VTC training for a number of years. AFIT can teach a class on site and, via VTC, link up with a number of other AF bases promoting amazing efficiencies. This method allows evaluators to see the interviewee in action and is much more efficient than actual travel. DL and VTC lessons learned can be discussed with the communications community, education offices, AFIT, and organizations like the Defense Systems Management College (DSMC). For control of the process to ensure equity worldwide, MAJCOM Comptrollers need to be included in the discussions up front. Policy guidance needs to be sent the field, the interview questions must be controlled, and an administrator as well as a technical representative will need to be in the interview room at all times. All of these issues are minor. The only major issue at this point is technology and it's improving every day.

Teleconferencing is another viable option. This gives evaluators everything VTC gives except a visual image. Is a visual image absolutely necessary to accomplish the objectives of the FMCP interview? I don't believe it is; however, control of the process is still an issue for FMCP administrators. Even if it's deemed necessary to send one FMCP representative out to the field in order to control the interview questions (i.e., carry the folder) and oversee the process, five additional TDYs are saved. This is a low cost solution that is extremely workable with a small amount of cooperation from the field Comptrollers. Of course time differences will have to be worked around for overseas

bases, but there are fewer and fewer interview candidates overseas and three hours per day of interview time should be adequate.

Videotaped interviews offer everything the FMCP process is trying to capture. The visual feedback is available and the artificial stress is created. In addition, time differences at overseas bases is negated and everyone truly will be on a level playing surface since every interviewee will be on her or his own turf. Also, the interview cycle can be changed to allow for a time that is convenient to the interviewees rather than the panel members. For instance, the panel members like to come in the Spring since their workload is not at its peak. When the summer review comes around, they are extremely busy. MAJCOM staffs are extremely busy during the Spring preparing command financial plans. Videotaping allows a flexible schedule that makes the interview much more equitable for MAJCOM staffs. Finally, videotapes can store a number of interviews and can be reviewed and scored by panel members at their convenience. This also allows less experienced panel members (first timers) the ability to review segments of tape when disagreement occurs and receive explanations by more experienced panel members. All of this for the cost of a videotape, postage, and the time spent by interview panels and interviewees -- travel cost is excluded.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The FMCP administrators (AFCPMC/DPC) should seriously discuss all of the alternatives listed above. In the short run, videotaped interviews mailed to HQ Civilian Personnel Management Center offer the most promise at the lowest cost. While policies to control the process and ensure integrity must be developed by the FMCP

administrators, it can be done systematically and implemented quickly resulting in incredible savings. The savings can then, hopefully, be used to increase the training and development of FMCP registrants. For example, if oral communication skills are deficient for some registrants, effective communication courses or seminars can be funded. Instead of simply weeding out those lacking in certain skills, hidden potential can be nourished and developed. The effect will be higher levels of competence and competition which invariably will lead to more efficient and effective mission accomplishment. With all the current discussion about streamlining, this is an issue ripe for change. I believe the Air Force will save money and, at the same time, increase the FMCP talent pool.